

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE STATE OF LITERACY IN NIGERIA AND CUBA

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Abstract

Literacy has been identified as an important instrument through which any country can attain development. It is on this belief that government and people of Nigeria have taken the issue of how to increase literacy rates among children and adults as an important one. Despite this, Nigeria is among E-9 countries, which are countries that account for more than 50% of the world's population and have the highest number of illiterates when her counterpart in other developing country for example Cuba has attained almost 100% literacy rate. It is against this background that this paper examines comparative analyses of the status of literacy in Nigeria and Cuba. Factors responsible for the state of literacy in the two countries were indentified and analysed. The paper concludes that Nigeria can learn from Cuba in order to improve her literacy status.

Keywords: Comparative; Status; Literacy; Nigeria and Cuba

Introduction

In 1950, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, estimated that the illiteracy rate in Nigeria was about 84.4% (El-Rufa'i, n.d). This shocking figure is an indication of tragic reality of illiteracy in Nigeria. The issue of how to increase literacy rates generally and adult literacy in particular, has engaged the attention of Nigerian leaders and scholars since independence in 1960. The reason for this appears obvious. According to Omolewa (2006), if we want to conquer poverty, ignorance and disease, we must first conquer illiteracy. He added

that illiteracy is the most serious handicap for economic, political, social and individual development that we know. Literacy as defined by UNESCO (2010) is the ability of a person to function in all the activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and the community and also for enabling him/her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his/her own and the community's development. Many writers have alluded to the potency of literacy for individual and societal development. Ampene (1980:2) claims that the usefulness of literacy cannot be denied, the new literate, if properly instructed and made aware that literacy is a tool for liberation and enriched living, gains confidence and dignity. Bhola (1983) argues that without literacy there cannot be development. He further sees literacy as a necessary tool for the reduction of poverty.

The focus of this paper is to compare the status of literacy in Nigeria with that of Cuba in order to improve the state of literacy in Nigeria so that Nigeria can tread the path of development as being attained by those countries including Cuba who have given a running battle to illiteracy. The choice of Cuba as a comparing country with Nigeria in literacy is premised on the fact that both countries are developing countries in Latin America and Africa respectively. But Cuba has attained 98% of literacy rate across level of ages. How does it happen? What lessons can we learn to improve our own? These are some of the questions that this paper is set out to achieve.

Historical Background of Literacy Efforts in Nigeria

Nigeria, prior to independence in 1960, had a history of dominance of Quranic schools in the North and Missionary schools in the south. All of these promoted mostly religious literacy. Thus the intervention of the Islamic clerics exposed the Northern part of the country to Arabic literacy. With the advent of Christian missionaries later came western education, through which they exposed the whole of southern Nigeria and part of the inland region to literacy (Aderinoye, 2002).

These existing efforts were recognized by the British colonial office in its memorandum on Education Policy in British Tropical Africa, published in 1925, which recommended among others a national literacy campaign which took off in 1946 (Aderinoye, 2002).

Hence, between 1952 and 1960 the regional governments embarked on policies aimed at developing the education sector. While the Western and Eastern regional governments provided Universal Primary Education (UPE), the Northern Regional Government opted for free primary and adult literacy in its War Against Ignorance. This set the tone for adult literacy development in the country during the first two decades of post-independence Nigeria

Literacy efforts in Nigeria received a significant boost when UNESCO supported the establishment of an Adult Literacy Institute in 1963

in Ibadan to train professional adult educators. Then in 1982, the Civilian Government launched a 10-year National Mass Literacy Campaign. In order to achieve the goals of this 10-year campaign, the Federal Government directed each of the states to establish an Agency for Mass Education.

A great wind of change came in 1990; when the Federal Military Government established the National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-formal Education to coordinate adult and non-formal education programmes in the country. With the launching of UBE programme in 2000 literacy opportunity is expected to be provided for all.

At this junction, the question that comes to mind is that, what are the fruits of these efforts? On this note the status of literacy in Nigeria shall be examined.

Status of Literacy in Nigeria

In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, primary education remains the bedrock of literacy skills acquisition; however, non-formal education is also an essential component of the educational system at the present time.

At independence in 1960 a total of 15,703 primary schools with an enrolment of 2,912,618 children were established. By the year 1996 the number of primary schools had risen from 15,703 in 1960 to 40,055, an increase of 255%. School enrolment had reached 14,078,478. Thus pupil-school ratio changed from 185 pupils per school in 1960 and 301 per school in 1996 (Aderinoye, 2002).

The 1991 census data shows that 57 per cent of Nigerians can be said to be literate. Although this seems to be an improvement on the situation in the 1980s, when it was estimated that Nigeria was about 40-45 % literate, the census data on literacy is still relatively low on the basis of age group. This is shown in distribution of literate population by age group in table 1 below.

Table 1: Distribution of Literate Population by Age

Age Group (Years)	Total (%)
6 – 14	33.0
15-24	29.9
25-39	24.0
40-54	10.0
55+	3.1

Source: National population Commission 1991.

The table above indicates that 33% of Nigerians within the ages of 6-14 are literates while 67% of them are illiterates. And this will further increase adult illiteracy rate which is not favourable to development of Nigeria. The table further revealed that only 29.9% of adults within the ages of 15-24 are literates while 24% of them within the ages of 25-39 are literates. This indicates that literacy rate is relatively low on the basis of age group.

Elsewhere in the 1991 census figures it is evident that about 60 % of the male population is literate and only 40 % of the female population is literate. Clearly the literacy rate among female is low.

The 2006 National Census indicates the level of literacy among male and female children population in rural and urban areas which varies between 40.9% and 82.6% among male while that of female ranges between 14.6% and 74.7%. With regard to adult population aged between 15 and above, the level of literacy ranges between 14.6% and 62.8% for female while that of male ranges between 40.9% and 81.3% (Nigerian National Population Figure as at 2006).

Recently published data by National Bureau of Statistics, 2010 indicates that about 40% of children aged less than 15years make up Nigerian's population. An estimated population of 3million(8.1%) children under 15years of age have never attended school while dropout rate among children currently in school was estimated at a little above 1million. Entire population of all ages who can read and write in any language is 78.6% consists of 84.35% male and 72.65% female.

Historical Background of Literacy Efforts in Cuba

From the first Spanish settlements in 1511 through 1898, Cuban education was typical of Spanish-speaking Latin America: a combination of parochial and secular institutions supporting and supported by the affluent Roman Catholic Spanish colonial elite. By 1833, Cuba had 210 schools for whites with 8,460 students but only 12 schools for 486 black students. Few poor or minority students received free instruction in public or religious schools (Kellner, 1989).

In 1898 there was U.S intervention to free Cuba from Spain and to create democratic, locally controlled institutions. The intervention of U.S in Cuba led to increased access to education. Despite these educational advances, general dissatisfaction with the government led to instability in 1906. Consequently, the United States dispatched additional personnel to establish order. Some measures were put in place such as sharp penalties for violations of mandatory education; school-age children found in the street during school hours were arrested, and factory owners employing child labourers were fined. In 1908, the school enrolment was reported to be 200,000 pupils in the public system and 15,000 pupils in the private system (Jeffries, 1967).

Educational reform in Cuba took root following the Cuban Revolution of 1959. After the 1959 Revolution, two major education-related goals emerged: making education available to all and connecting this new educational system to socioeconomic development (Perez, 1995). Achieving these goals required a new national educational system that could educate a largely illiterate population. Consequently, a National Literacy Campaign

was launched in 1961 to instil basic literacy skills to citizens in the poorest and most remote regions of the country. What next is to see the result of this campaign and other efforts on the Cuba literacy rate?

Status of Literacy in Cuba

Before 1959 the official literacy rate for Cuba was between 60-76 % for all ages. There was a dichotomy between urban citizens and rural citizens. The rate of illiteracy among city dwellers was 11%, compared to 41.7% in the countryside (Jeffries, 1967). As a result, the Cuban government of Fidel Castro behest dubbed 1961 the "year of education", and sent "literacy brigades" out into the countryside to construct schools, train new educators, and teach the predominately illiterate *Guajiros* (peasants) to read and write. By the completion of the campaign, 707,212 adults were taught to read and write, raising the national literacy rate to 96 % (Kellner, 1989).

The percentage of children enrolled in school in Cuba (ages 6–12) increased dramatically over the years: 1953—56%, 1970—88%, 1986—nearly 100% (Perez, 1995).

In 2002 literacy rate among adults aged 15 and above in Cuba amounts to 99.8% in male and female gender. It is an interesting story to note that in 2009 the literacy rate in the entire population of Cuba across ages reached 99.83% (Central Investigation Agency (CIA), 2012).

Cuba’s achievements of the Education for All (EFA) goals far outstrip most underdeveloped countries. According to United Nation (UN) statistics reported by Everett (2012), 100% of Cubans of 15-24 years of age (both boys and girls) are literate; 96.2% of primary school aged children are enrolled; and 92.6% were completing their primary education in 2004. Cuba is the only Latin American and non-English-speaking Caribbean country considered by UNESCO to have achieved the EFA goals. In addition, Cuba is ranked 10th out of 125 countries in adult literacy (UNESCO, 2010).

Differences between Literacy Status in Nigeria and Cuba

Studying the status of literacy in Nigeria and Cuba as depicted above, a number of differences can be made. These differences are summarised in table 2.

Table 2: Differences between Literacy Status in Nigeria and Cuba

Nigeria	Cuba
In 1950 the literacy rate in Nigeria for all ages was 15.6%	It was 60-76% literacy rate for all ages in Cuba in 1959
The percentage of primary school children enrolled in school in Nigeria ranges from 62% to 72% between 1970 and 1980s (Aderinoye, 2002).	The percentage of children enrolled in school in Cuba (ages 6–12) increased dramatically over the years: 1953—56%, 1970—88%, 1986—nearly 100% (Perez, 1995).
Analysis of the 1991 Nigerian National Census data along gender lines shows that	Cuba has attained 98% literacy rate within its male and female population since early

while about 60 per cent of the male population is literate, only 40 per cent of the female population is literate in Nigeria (National population Commission 1991.	1990 (Perez, 1995).
Entire population of all ages who can read and write in any language is 78.6% consists of 84.35% male and 72.65% female Specifically adult literacy rate is about 56.9% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010).	As at 2009 the literacy rate in the entire population of Cuba across ages reached 99.83% (Central Investigation Agency (CIA), 2012).
Nigeria is among E-9 countries, which are countries that account for more than 50% of the world's population and have the highest number of illiterates	Cuba is ranked 10th out of 125 countries in adult literacy (UNESCO, 2010).

The table above indicates clearly that significant difference exists between Nigeria literacy rate with that of Cuba as Cuba is almost attaining 100% literacy rate across all ages. The questions that stem from this comparison are: How does this happen? What are the factors responsible for the literacy status in Nigeria? And what are factors responsible for the successes attained in the Cuban literacy?

Comparative Analyses of Factors Responsible for the Status of Literacy in Nigeria and Cuba

There are a number of factors that responsible for the current state of literacy in Nigeria and Cuba. Comparative analyses of these factors are:

Literacy survey

Nigeria has not got accurate numbers of people who need literacy to enable her plan accordingly. A national assessment of literacy levels and practices is essential if Nigeria is to present a realistic account of its Universal Basic Education achievement by the year 2015, when the assessment of EFA goals will be conducted. The reliance on citizens' self-reporting on literacy is not reliable.

Surprisingly, the first step taken by Cuban government when she declared her literacy campaign in 1960 was to conduct a national survey of illiterates in the country with the aim of identifying the actual people that required literacy education. By August of 1961, when the census was officially deemed to have been completed, 985,000 illiterate Cubans had been located (Fagen, 1969). This census has assisted to reach out to those who need literacy

National Literacy Campaign

Though a number of national literacy campaigns have been launched by Nigerian government since colonial era. Unfortunately, many of these campaigns have not been sincerely planned and executed and were unable to survive for a number of reasons ranging from political power shift, political

party policy differences at state levels and low financial commitment from the federal government. For example in September 1982, the federal government launched a ten-year mass literacy campaign (Zakari, 2002:51). The main objective of the campaign was to make 50-55 million Nigerians literate within the period of ten year but amazingly only ten million naira was set aside for the campaign which is meagre to meet the target.

In the case of Cuba a National Literacy Campaign was launched in 1961. It was an offensive campaign against illiteracy, with the ambitious goal of teaching every illiterate person to read and write. Over nine months in 1961, designated the “Year of Education”, more than a quarter of a million men, women and schoolchildren were mobilised into a teaching force with incentives such as a standard grey uniform, a warm blanket, a hammock, two textbooks; *We Shall Read* and *We Shall Conquer* – and a gas-powered lantern, so that lessons could be given at night after work ended (Kozol, 1978).

Funding

Lack of adequate funds to formal education and the low priority accorded to adult literacy programs by federal and state governments is a huge factor. Policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels do not regard adult literacy education with seriousness. For example between 2004 and 2012 the budgetary allocation to education in Nigeria is between 4.83% and 9.15% (Okogu, 2011) when UNESCO recommends that countries should devote not less than 23% of their annual budget to education.

It is interesting to note that UNESCO has praised Cuba’s expenditure on education which according to the United Nations Human Development Report 2010 was 13.8 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) compared to an average of about 0.7% and 3% of GDP in Nigeria since 2007 to date (El-Rufai, n.d)

Geographical Distribution of Educational Facilities

Nigeria's geographical distribution of educational facilities are "lopsided" In rural areas, illiteracy is much greater than in urban areas. The three main reasons are: lack of education facilities in the country side; limited access to education for rural young people; and survival demands which make families keep their children out of school (Aderinoye, 2002).

Cuban government has really addressed the problem of lopsidedness of geographical distribution of educational facilities in favour of urban areas since 1961 when she launched her revolutionary national literacy campaign. In this connection, Cuban government lead by Fidel Castro declared 1961 the "year of education", and sent "literacy brigades" out into the countryside to construct schools, train new educators, and teach the predominately illiterate *Guajiros* (peasants) to read and write. The campaign was "a remarkable

success", and by the completion of the campaign, 707,212 adults were taught to read and write, raising the national literacy rate to 96 % (Kellner, 1989).

Educational Institutions

A number of educational structures were put in place by Nigeria government to administer educational programmes at different levels of education. Specifically, Universal Basic Education Commission, National Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (NMEC), National Nomadic Education Commission, State Agencies for Mass Education are established to provide basic education in Nigeria. Unfortunately, these agencies have not been adequately financed and encouraged to deliver. For example NMEC has policy documents such as guidelines for setting up literacy centres, curricula for out-of-schoolboys, integrated Quran schools, girl child and adolescent girls and adult and youth education. But it can do little with poor funding from federal government and less support from the states.

On contrary, Cuban government has provided enabling environment to the National Literacy Commission of Cuba to deliver in her literacy efforts. For example Leiner (1985) reported that Cuban government invested heavily on National Literacy Commission of Cuba to provide necessary materials, physical resources, teacher preparation, personnel development, equipment and incentives to literacy workers in order to succeed in the battle against illiteracy. These supports might have translated to the success recorded in the rate of literacy in the Cuba.

Community Participation

The participation of the every sector of Cuban society in the literacy campaign has equally been identified to have contributed to the success of literacy in the country. For example all universities and secondary schools on the island were closed down and volunteers were sought from them as literacy instructors (Fagen, 1969). Worker groups and community organizations such as the Confederation of Cuban Workers, the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, the Association of Small Farmers, and the Federation of Cuban Women joined in the teaching of literacy (Fagen, 1969).

Though a similar to this approach, "Each One To Teach One" was adopted in Nigeria during the 1992 Mass Literacy Campaign. But because of apparent inadequate preparation and lack of proper public enlightenment, it has virtually remained a mere slogan.

Having comparatively analysed the factors responsible for the status of literacy in Nigeria and Cuba it is clear that Nigeria can learn one or two things from Cuba to improve its state of literacy rate.

Lessons Nigeria can Learn from Cuba Literacy Efforts

The following lessons can be learnt by Nigeria from Cuba literacy efforts for better result in literacy delivery;

1. There is need to conduct a nation -wide literacy survey in order to indentify the actual number of Nigerians that need literacy across ages and plan accordingly to provide the literacy facilities. This was what Cuban government did since 1960 which has helped them to reach the right persons with literacy.
2. The Federal Government should as a matter of urgency set the machinery in motion to institute another mass literacy campaign that will be effectively carried out where every literate Nigeria would be mobilized to participate in literacy delivery. The government can borrow a leaf from Cuba literacy campaign where all university and secondary school students were mobilised for teaching literacy skills for one year. If this cannot be done Nigeria can deploy all NYSC members to literacy teaching for a year and see the result.
3. There is need to improve funding to education. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing education in Nigeria is inadequate funding by federal, state and local governments. At all levels, adult and non-formal education suffers seriously from under-funding. If Nigeria is to attain even part of the EFA Millennium Development Goals, there is a real need to consult widely and come up with a reliable and workable funding mechanism. The Federal Government must support workforce literacy by developing tax incentives, infrastructure development and support, public awareness campaigns and supportive policies to ensure accessibility of literacy and numeracy skills training to the masses. State and local governments need to take greater responsibility and treat adult education with the seriousness it deserves. The lack of consistent and adequate funding, vision, strategy, and coordination has meant that literacy services have tended to *"fall through the cracks"*. Our goal must be to ensure that all Nigerians are equipped to face the challenges of a new, complex world. To help reach that goal, governments must make literacy a policy and funding priority
4. Strengthening of Basic Education Structures should also be one of the priorities of government in Nigeria. Agencies such as Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), National Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education Commission (NMEC), National Nomadic Education Commission (NNEC), State Agencies for Mass Education should be supported financially and morally to operate for quality service delivery.
5. The private sectors, wealthy individuals and philanthropists should be encouraged to participate in literacy delivery.

Conclusion

It is evident from the status of literacy in Nigeria presented in this paper that much is needed to be achieved since the literacy rate across ages in the country is presently is 78.6% consists of 84.35% male and 72.65% female. Specifically adult literacy rate is about 56.9% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010) meaning that almost half of the adult population are illiterates despite a number of programmes put in place to address adult illiteracy. And by implication Nigeria needs to show more commitments and see what can be learnt from Cuba to improve on our effort to make literacy available to all in Nigeria.

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